

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

REFUGE UPDATE

Presented at the Lake Onalaska Protection and Rehabilitation District Annual Meeting

September 8, 2020

Biology/Management projects

- **Flowering Rush a New Invasive Species:** Flowering Rush is an aquatic invasive plant that when emergent looks like native rushes, and when submersed appears like native wild celery. It is cryptic unless flowering during low-water summers. It's possible that it was a semi-recent invasion into the UMR system but not identifiable until the low water of 2020. It reproduces through seeds, root bulbils (little root pods that float), and broken root systems. It is highly mobile and readily reroots/resprouts when disturbed by boats, dredging, wildlife, drawdowns and floods. It was discovered in Pool 8 in mid-June, and by mid-July USFWS, WI/MN DNRs, and LTRM staff was mapping it in all pools of the UMR. In the La Crosse District there are 6-8 known small patches of flowering rush plants in Pool 7, including one location in Lake Onalaska. In Pool 8 there are multiple large infestations. The refuge is coordinating the permits for aquatic herbicide application in the future, but removal through digging is NOT recommended. Its food value to North American waterfowl isn't well known. (a map with the locations where it was detected in 2020 is attached).



- **Prairie:** In 2020 skilled technicians conducted surveys on native and restored prairies using the NWRS Prairie Restoration Initiative protocol and the data is still be summarized. Over 135 species were recorded at Brice Prairie. Treatment of woody vegetation in highly-infested areas of Brice Prairie was conducted in August 2020, and if conditions permit other target areas will be treated in September. There will always be an issue of woody plant encroachment due to seed trees such as Siberian elm off-refuge that

rain onto the prairie. Control of these woody plants are cyclical based on staffing and availability of seasonal control techniques (herbicide application, hand-removal, mowing, burning). We appreciate the assistance of local volunteers that periodically manually remove woody vegetation in select areas.



- **Forest Inventory:** in 2020, approximately 100 forest inventory sites were completed in Pool 8 around the Root River, some of these confirming willow stands and others inventorying the forest conditions between the main channel and Lawrence Lake. Overall, approximately 590 forest inventory sites have been collected in Pools 7 and 8 since 2017.
- **Slow No Wake Posting and other sign maintenance** – It's that time of year to get out and make sure refuge signs are visible and the "slow no wake"/"voluntary avoidance areas" and "Closed to Migratory Bird Hunting areas" are marked before the start of the waterfowl season.



- **Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Areas-** Staff will be deploying the buoys on Lake Onalaska for the Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area. Waterfowl need a place to rest and refuge to feed and gain necessary resources for migration. Please help us by avoiding this area from October 15 to the end of state duck hunting season.
- **Fishing Pier Installed at Fred Funk Boat Landing:** Normal water conditions this spring permitted the contractor to install the new fishing pier at Fred Funk Boat Landing. Fishing use has greatly increased in the last six months due to Covid-19 restrictions and a greater interest in outdoor activities.



- **Upper Halfway Creek Marsh:** Repairs to the dikes and sediment removal is in the works at Upper Halfway Creek Marsh through a North American Wetlands Conservation Act Grant in partnership with Ducks Unlimited. A water control structure and dike on Pool B was repaired last fall.
- **New Staff:** Amy Mueller is joining the staff of the La Crosse District as our new Administrative Support Assistant.
- **HREP (Habitat Rehabilitation and Enhancement Projects):** were inspected in 2020. Normal water conditions permitted the inspections of some of the HREP project features in Pools 7 and 8. Year long high water conditions in 2019 caused damage to some of the protecting islands and shorelines.
- **Vegetation Cutting on Lake Onalaska:** A Refuge Special Use Permit was issued to the Lake Onalaska Protection and Rehabilitation District for harvesting aquatic vegetation to improve access on an agreed travel corridor. LOPRD volunteers placed the red and green navigation buoys to mark the corridor and harvest path.

Wildlife update!

- **Waterfowl Counts** –Fall migration waterfowl counts will be conducted in the Pool 8 Goose Island Closed Area this year.
- **Waterfowl Disturbance Monitoring on Lake Onalaska Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area:** USGS will be continuing a study to monitor disturbance to resting/feeding waterfowl using the Lake Onalaska Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area. We ask the public to please avoid the area marked with the buoys from October 15th to the end of the state duck season.
- **Black Tern Surveys:** Biology staff conducted Black Tern surveys at Blue, Target and Lawrence Lakes on Pool 8, and at Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge. Adult numbers were up from 2019 with the greatest concentration on Blue Lake. Lower (more normal) water conditions led to better nesting conditions and greater nesting habitat availability.

- **Bat Surveys:** In 2019 bat detectors were deployed at 15 locations in Pools 7 and 8. The data is still being processed but overall, the most commonly recorded species were little brown, big brown, silverhaired and hoary bats. In some areas of the refuge like the Black River Bottoms and the Root River, tri-colored bats have been detected along the forested-river interface. This is welcomed news since tri-colored bats are one of the species hit hard in hibernation by white-nose syndrome, and their numbers are declining range-wide. A few acoustic records of red bats and evening bats also turned up in the data. State agencies have noted that Evening bats seem to be going through a range expansion into the upper Midwest. Bat detectors have been deployed again this season and we are hopeful that we can gain a better understanding of bat use of this great migratory corridor.



Visitor Services projects

- **Visitor Center/Office Operations related to the Covid-19 outbreak:** The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge is working with federal, state, and local public health authorities to closely monitor the COVID-19 pandemic. As an agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is following a three-phased approach to re-opening that is modeled on the White House *Guidelines for Opening Up America Again*.

Currently we are in Phase 1 of re-opening and some staff are returning to limited field and maintenance work. The lands and waters of the Refuge are open for public enjoyment, however offices and visitor centers will remain closed. We anticipate re-opening the Visitor Center during Phase 3, on a timeline that will depend on state and local conditions and may move forward or backward in phases to adapt to current conditions.

We are committed to increasing access to refuge facilities as quickly as possible when risks to the health and safety of our visitors, staff, and volunteers can be safely mitigated. We are looking forward to seeing everyone again in-person as soon as it's safe to do so and wish everyone healthy and enjoyable adventures outdoors!

- **Environmental Education:** Our partnership with Sand Lake Elementary third graders will look a little different this year as students will not be able to come to the refuge for in-person field trips, BUT, we are very excited to still offer a way for students to connect to nature! Each student will receive a naturalist kit containing a nature journal,

weather equipment, a bug jar, and a field guide, and every month we plan to offer students a nature journaling prompt/activity that they can do at home with their families.

- **High visitor use on the Refuge:** Local stores are reporting fishing supplies in high demand, boat sales up, VS team brainstorming ways to interact with new visitors
- **Refuge Trapping and Trap Tag sales:** Refuge trap tag special use permits will be coordinated via mail this fall. Trappers who participated in the 2019 season will receive a packet of information and instructions to receive their trap tags/permit. We'll have a little different leg work with this process this season, but are happy we have a means to facilitate the process even if the Visitor Center is not open.

General Information:

- **Great American Outdoors Act** – Congress passed the “Great American Outdoors Act,” which will provide \$9.5 billion dollars to the Department of the Interior to address deferred maintenance needs at National Parks and other public lands and over \$900 million per year to the Land and Water Conservation Fund for new conservation and recreation opportunities, over the next five years. Read more about the Act here: <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-bernhardt-designates-fee-free-day-public-lands-commemorate-president-trumps>
- **Hunting and Fishing Opportunities Expanded at 138 National Wildlife Refuges & Fish Hatcheries** – Refuges and fish hatcheries are offering new hunting and fishing opportunities as they open previously closed tracts of land to these forms of recreation. As hunting and fishing participation has generally declined since the 1980s, funding for wildlife conservation has also declined due as state agencies see declines in license purchases and reduced funding through a special excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and fishing gear. This effort to increase hunting and fishing access is aimed at recruiting, retaining, or reactivating outdoor recreationists to both increase the relevancy of our public lands and conservation funding. Read more about the announcement here: <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-bernhardt-announces-historic-expansion-hunting-and-fishing-opportunities>

EE Kits for Students at Home Learning

